

Diverse Communities, Diverse Media: A Report on the OURMedia Conference, University of Goroka 21–25 July 2014



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OURMedia is an international network of scholars, activists and practitioners interested in community-based media and media diversity. The network was formed in 2000 and has minimal formal structures. The University of Goroka (UOG) conference was the tenth international OURMedia conference and the first of its kind to be held in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Participants were mostly Papua New Guineans but many international scholars came from Australia and further afield, including Colombia, Japan, and the United States. Some delegates had never visited PNG before. Discussions inevitably focussed on PNG but the infusion of external perspectives was valuable, particularly from those not familiar with the host country.

UOG's Centre for Social and Creative Media (CSCM) hosted the event and did an outstanding job of organising the conference and looking after participants. The centre clearly has a distinctive vision of nurturing skilled media practitioners capable of engaging with the diverse communities of PNG. This was demonstrated in many of the presentations and film screenings, but also in the field trips on the third day of the conference where participants went out to 'communities' around Goroka, using video and other media as part of the interaction.

The conference explored new uses of media in development activities and the spread of new technologies such as mobile phones and the internet. Anthropologists Robert Foster and Heather Horst mapped out their new Pacific-wide comparative research project on mobile phones. Their study is grounded in Horst's earlier work in Jamaica where the introduction of mobile telephones among low-income Jamaicans produced not a flourishing of micro-entrepreneurialism, but did expand the personal redistributive networks that allow poor Jamaicans to juggle financial pressures and even to advance their educational prospects.

Masalai blogger Emmanuel Narokobi presented statistics on the use of Facebook in PNG. This has

grown from 30,000 users in 2010 to 300,000 so far in 2014. The number of users doubled in 2012 after Digicel introduced a wireless internet package. While there was some discussion of the political implications of these new technologies, not least by another blogger, Martyn Namorong, the focus of the conference tended to be led by community development practitioners sharing pragmatic and effective ways of reaching their target audiences. International presenters such as Faumuina Tafuna'i from Women in Business Development Samoa showed how mobile technology could be used to the advantage of family farmers in Samoa and potentially other Pacific countries. Helen Travers from HITnet documented the use of media kiosks to deliver health information based on locally developed content in Indigenous Australian communities. She gave an example from the Napranum community (Western Cape York) where young people had made a very entertaining hip-hop video loaded with health promotion messages.

Within the conference, there were a great variety of perspectives. However, presentations and the questions and discussions following them were typically framed in terms of a perceived dilemma of development and culture. This took the form of two narratives: one of grassroots community-based national development, and the other a narrative of cultural loss and revival. Arguably, both of these narratives have the unintended consequence that educated and creative Papua New Guineans tend to marginalise themselves in their own analysis, work, and advocacy. This is because their own life and professional experiences within a relatively privileged position in society do not fit easily with their ideas of the grassroots as the legitimate group deserving development or 'the village' as the true place of authentic Melanesian cultural life. One of the keynote speakers, the anthropologist Paige West, warned that these processes can produce 'hollowed out' or generic views of indigenous culture that can also be appropriated by tourism and development industries.

These are indeed complicated issues to work through and often lead to circuitous discussions that do not immediately appear to offer any particularly constructive ways forward. Of particular concern is the apparent lack of awareness of the ways in which the language of tradition might be used to legitimise unjust and exploitative forms of power in PNG, not only in the political sphere but also in relation to domestic practices including gender-based violence.

These caveats notwithstanding, several outstanding presenters found paths through the development–culture labyrinth. They shared their fresh analytical perspectives, creative models and reports of successful experiments. Here only a few are mentioned, with apologies to other very good presentations left out of this account. Some of these were inspiring stories, not least the bravery of Monica Paulus, Mary Kini, and Yoxray Atono of the Highlands Human Rights Defenders. This group intervenes in situations where women are threatened with violence, particularly in relation to accusations of sorcery. In the course of their work, the Defenders are often threatened and have suffered violent attacks themselves. These three courageous women spoke to the conference themselves, but their stories have also been captured on film by the Utrecht-based film-maker Maria Sagrista in her www.savethewitch.com project.

One impressive presentation was from Jane Awi, a recent PhD graduate from QUT, now working at UOG. Awi demonstrated a creative and effective response to the narratives of development and cultural integrity, utilising both in her educative drama practice. Drawing on local traditions from a Highlands village, Awi explored the use of ‘folk opera’ for promoting health messages about HIV/AIDS. Often these messages are highly didactic and delivered in a hectoring or moralising tone but this was quite the exception. Nor did this project simply repackage biomedical texts in superficial *bilas* (customary decoration). Rather, Awi was able to fully utilise the affective and metaphorical power of traditional art forms to deliver a powerful message

that connected with the audience. Of note was that her folk opera performance was also accompanied by the presence of HIV/AIDS service providers who were at hand to conduct blood tests. Many villagers lined up to access these services after the performance.

Another creative leader was Jennifer Baing Waiko, an extraordinary farmer from the Markham valley who has made a food/travel TV series — *Café Niugini*, to be launched later this year — that profiles 25 different communities of PNG and celebrates their distinctive food cultures. The program also emphasises the place of local food as healthier and more nutritious than most modern diets in PNG, which are based on highly processed ingredients. This creation of PNG content within a TV format that is now thoroughly global is one innovative answer to the dilemma of culture and development mentioned above. Baing Waiko’s story is also profiled in the *Paua Meri* (powerful women) films, which were also screened at the conference.

Throughout the conference, the communicative power of music and visual storytelling was underscored in the use of video and other media. Within academia and even the development sector, these media still receive inadequate attention and are perhaps still regarded as lower order means of communication, inferior to the written word. CSCM is to be congratulated for the impressive steps it has taken in its vision of using diverse media to connect the university to its surrounding communities and the broader nation of PNG. While the dilemmas of development and culture may never reach a resolution, the tenth OURMedia conference certainly put on show a remarkable range of creative responses that are already in use in PNG and beyond.

Author Notes

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